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REVIEW OF THE EFFICIENCY OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE AND FINANCIAL FUNCTIONING OF THE UNITED NATIONS

Letter dated 22 April 1991 from the Permanent Representative of Luxembourg to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to forward herewith the formal position paper of the European Community and its twelve member States entitled "Restructuring and revitalization of the United Nations in the economic and social fields", for the resumed forty-fifth session of the General Assembly (29 April-3 May 1991), as called for by the Assembly in its resolution 45/177 of 19 December 1990.

In order to facilitate the ongoing consultations taking place prior to the resumed session we would appreciate it if the present letter and its annex could be circulated as an official document of the General Assembly under agenda item 117.

(Signed) Jean FEYDER
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

ANNEX

Contribution of the European Community and its twelve member States on restructuring and revitalization of the United Nations in the economic and social fields

New York, 16 April 1991

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The United Nations provides an important forum for the exchange of views and for consensus-building at the global level on major social and economic problems. It should be a forum where these problems are dealt with in a constructive and effective manner. The United Nations should, within the context of the Charter, enhance the interest taken by governmental or non-governmental parties in its debate, by a selection of issues.

2. In resolution 45/177 of 19 Decenber 1990, the General Assembly calls for re-examination and reinforcement of the United Nations in the economic and social fields. The United Nations, guided by the policy orientations set by the Assembly, has an important role to play in the promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms as well as in supporting development, particularly in the development of developing countries. It also has the task of promoting regional and subregional cooperation in the economic and social fields. It should be a forum where experts can meet to discuss and to reach agreement on technical issues of common interest, to exchange information, to promote cooperation and to make practical proposals to the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly. It also has a role in coordinating humanitarian assistance to countries facing emergency situations.

3. The United Nations should provide opportunities to discuss new and emerging socio-economic issues of interest to the international community and for in-depth discussions of cross-sectoral issues related to development, such as poverty, energy, environment, human development and population. The United Nations could have a major impact on the global understanding of new and emerging issues, both as a result of the accumulated knowledge of these subjects in the United Nations system and the interdisciplinary approach that the Organization is able to take towards these subjects.

4. In order to fulfil these roles adequately, the United Nations intergovernmental machinery in the economic, social and related fields should reflect the needs of enhancing international cooperation and promoting the development of the developing countries, in accordance with the Declaration on International Economic Cooperation, in particular the Revitalization of Economic Growth and Development of the Developing Countries, adopted by the General Assembly at its eighteenth special session (resolution S-18/3, annex), and the International Development Strategy for the Fourth United Nations Development Decade (resolution 45/199, annex).

5. The objective of the present paper is not to make firm proposals, but to identify options that would improve the functioning of the intergovernmental machinery in the economic and social fields. By selecting from the options it will be possible to devise a coherent programme of reform. Such a programme should be consistent with the Charter. It should aim at making the most efficient and economical use of resources. In making changes care should be taken not to disturb those parts of the intergovernmental machinery which are operating reasonably satisfactorily.

6. Options that could be considered by the resumed session of the General Assembly in April 1991 can be divided into five sections: the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council, subsidiary bodies of the Economic and Social Council, Secretariat support structures, and the relationship between the United Nations and its relevant specialized agencies.

II. THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

7. The General Assembly deals with economic and social issues in its Second and Third Committees, with the Fifth Committee taking appropriate administrative and budgetary decisions where necessary. The European Community and its member States consider that the General Assembly should continue to be the supreme organ of the United Nations on economic and social issues. There are nevertheless a number of options for change that might be introduced:

(a) A review of the respective agendas of the Second and Third Committees; the World Economic Survey and the Report on the World Social Situation should be amalgamated into a single document and form the basis of the general debate of the Second Committee;

(b) Increased biennialization of issues that do not need to be considered annually;

(c) More selective consideration of issues, perhaps by not taking up issues that have already been dealt with by the Economic and Social Council or Trade and Development Board in the same year, with due regard to articles 14 and 15 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly concerning supplementary and additional questions;

(d) More discussion sessions:

(i) Of the "Papadatos" type, that is, informal discussion with key-note speakers;

(ii) Panel discussions on specific themes in the context of an agenda item but in an informal setting;

(e) A reorganization of the way in which the General Assembly deals with the environment, including the consideration of the possibility of a separate

working group of the Second Committee to deal with environmental issues. This should also be examined in the context of the institutional discussions in the Preparatory Committee for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development to be held in 1992;

(f) Agendas need to be made leaner and more topical. A mechanism could be envisaged that would lead to the discontinuance of the consideration of items on the basis of obsolescence, duplication and/or inactive debates;

(g) Introduction of a "Chairman's summing-up", to be drafted with the help of the Secretariat, and replacing some of the draft resolutions.

III. THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

8. The Economic and Social Council deals with many of the same issues covered by the Second and Third Committees. It also receives reports from some bodies that it then transmits to the General Assembly. The Council covers its agenda through the work of three sessional Committees, the First, dealing with economic issues, the Second, with social issues, and the Third, with coordination. It also covers some items in plenary. It holds its second regular session each year at Geneva in July and its other sessions, including its first regular session, in New York. At the moment the May session in New York is devoted mainly to social issues and the July session at Geneva mainly to economic and coordination issues.

9. The European Community proposes the following changes to the present sessional arrangements:

(a) One relatively short high-level session of the Economic and Social Council devoted to an in-depth consideration of one or two major system-wide policy themes of a social and economic nature organized on the following lines:

(i) The debate should take an interdisciplinary approach; the heads of the concerned organizations, agencies and other organs of the United Nations system should participate actively in the debate. Member States and observers should be represented by senior officials or ministers;

(ii) The session should be prepared by relevant department secretariats; the Administrative Committee on Coordination should perform a coordinating role in these preparations; a single secretariat document should be produced for each of the themes;

(iii) The session should result in an agreed policy document negotiated in a drafting group;

(iv) This session would replace the general debate that currently takes place at the beginning of the second session of the Council;

(b) A second session of the Economic and Social Council should consider social and economic issues. We envisage that this session would be organized as follows:

(i) The session could have the following committee structure: the First Committee of the Council would deal with economic and environmental issues, except operational activities. The Second Committee would continue to deal with social matters and human rights. The Third Committee would deal with operational activities of the United Nations system and United Nations emergency operations. Issues of a socio-economic nature would be treated directly in plenary. Coordination issues would be dealt with in relation to substantive questions;

(ii) This session should spend a part of its work on new and emerging issues, on emergency situations and on environmental threats, as well as the coordination aspects of those issues;

(iii) The session should fulfil the coordinating functions of the Council and deal with the reports of its subsidiary bodies and functional committees;

(iv) During its sessions, the Council could meet more frequently in an informal setting to allow a more open exchange of views;

(v) Debates and resolutions or decisions on the regular reports of the subsidiary bodies and functional committees should - when necessary - be of a managerial and coordinating nature; they should deal with the recommendations in the reports and give guidance to the United Nations Secretariat with regard to coordination aspects;

(vi) The sessions should alternate between New York and Geneva;

(c) The organizational session remains as is.

IV. THE SUBSIDIARY BODIES OF THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

10. The present section also deals with some subsidiary bodies on the economic and social side that report directly to the General Assembly. The subsidiary machinery has grown over a long period and in an unplanned fashion. It needs regrouping and reshaping; a case may also be made for the creation of some new bodies. The subsidiary machinery has evolved partly to meet the new challenges that have arisen in the economic and social spheres since the United Nations was founded. Rationalization might involve the following:

(a) A more flexible approach to the programme of meetings of some subsidiary bodies, on the basis of the requirement for their expertise;

(b) Comparison and streamlining of mandates. There is particular need to look at overlaps and other problems in the mandates, for example, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the United Nations Centre for Transnational Corporations (UNCTC), the United Nations Conference on Science and Technology for Development (UNCSTD) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in the field of transfer of technology, foreign investment and trade questions;

(c) The merging, abolition, modification or "expertization" of some subsidiary bodies. The Committee on New and Renewable Natural Resources, the Committee on Natural Resources, the Committee on Science and Technology for Development and the High-level Committee on Technical Cooperation Among Developing Countries are among those which should be considered for appropriate action, which might include, inter alia, giving an environmental mandate to some of them (environmental issues generally should be considered in relation to the 1992 preparatory process);

(d) The participation of regional economic integration organizations in the economic and social fields should be strengthened;

(e) The agenda for expert groups should be set by the Economic and Social Council through which they report to the General Assembly: the meeting costs and travel expenses for experts from developing countries, specifically the least developed among them, would, in accordance with current practice, be paid from the regular budget of the United Nations subject to a limit fixed by the General Assembly. In order to be manageable, expert groups should be small and their members (perhaps not exceeding 24) should be appointed by the Secretary-General.

V. SECRETARIAT SUPPORT STRUCTURES

11. Secretariat support on the economic and social side is provided by a variety of different Under-Secretaries-General and Assistant Secretaries-General and their departments. The Director-General for Development and International Economic Cooperation, whose post was created in 1977 in the wake of the reforms introduced by the General Assembly in its resolution 32/197 of 20 December 1977, is the second-ranking official in the United Nations Secretariat. He is responsible for ensuring effective leadership to the United Nations in the fields of development and international economic cooperation and in exercising overall coordination in these fields.

12. Reform of the Secretariat is largely a matter for the Secretary-General in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Charter. The Secretariat structure should be governed by the structure at the intergovernmental level and not the other way round. It therefore follows that any reforms made as suggested in the other sections of the present paper would have consequences for the Secretariat, many of which could best be implemented by the Secretary-General, or by the General Assembly on his recommendation. Such measures might include the following:

(a) Rationalization or adjustment to areas where reforms have been made in the intergovernmental sphere. This should include a re-examination of the structure of the economic departments of the United Nations Secretariat;

(b) Strengthening the Director-General's office to enable him to concentrate on policy issues relative to his responsibilities, possibly through redeployment of resources. This might include the establishment of a small development policy planning capacity under his chairmanship. This proposal should be further elaborated in the context of a general reorganization of the economic side of the Secretariat;

(c) Examination of the scope for rationalizing the publication of major annual reports in the economic and social fields. This should include the merger of the World Economic Survey and the Report on the World Social Situation and the examination of other annual and multi-annual reports of the Secretariat.

VI. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE UNITED NATIONS AND ITS RELEVANT SPECIALIZED AGENCIES

13. The specialized agencies are numerous and varied. Their internal functioning is a matter for them under their own constitutions and guided by their own governing bodies. The relationship between them, and with the central organs of the United Nations, is a legitimate issue for consideration and is governed by Article 63 of the Charter. The Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly already receive the reports of a number of specialized agencies. The resumed session could look at the scope for improving relations with the specialized agencies, updating coordination mechanisms and making better use of existing relationship agreements.

VII. CONCLUSION

14. If a combination of the above measures were adopted this would constitute a worthwhile and effective reform package. The General Assembly should agree at its forthcoming resumed session on the timetable for future work on the restructuring and revitalization of the United Nations in the economic and social field. Its implementation could be reviewed regularly by the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly.